AML Report 3639

LAND MOLLUSCA FROM CONEYBURY HENGE, WILTSHIRE

By

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Coneybury Henge lies at just over 107 m on the Upper Chalk (Geological Survey Sheet 298) of Wessex on the west flank of the River Avon (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments 1979, p.13). It was partly excavated during the summer of 1980 by Julian Richards for the Wessex Archaeological Committee as part of their Stonehenge Environs Project. Archaeological horizons were restricted to a large enclosing ditch, a sizable pit predating the henge and some shallow features. No trace of a bank survived, consequently there was no old land surface from which evidence of the pre-enclosure environment could be obtained. Analytical work had perforce to be restricted to a major column of samples from the ditch and three spot samples from the features.

The methods of mollusc analysis employed are basically those outlined by Evans (1972) and the nomenclature follows Waldén (1976). The molluscs were generally in a good state of preservation although somewhat encrusted by a calcareous deposit. The chief difficulty of identification was to distinguish between the numerous small apical fragments of Aegopinella pura and Aegopinella nitidula. The results are shown in Table 1 and as histograms of relative abundance (Fig.I) in which each species is plotted as a percentage of the total individuals excluding the burrowing species Cecilioides acicula which is plotted as a percentage over and above the rest of the assemblage.

During the course of mollusc analysis the sediments were divided into various fractions on sieves. These fractions have been grouped into three: particles larger than 5.6 mm; particlee between 5.6 mm and 0.5 mm; and particles smaller than 0.5 mm. When plotted graphically (Fig.2) this provides a crude index of the extent of physical weathering and sorting within the ditch sediments. Also represented on the same digram are the numbers of molluscs per kilogramme of soil, which, by comparison with the sedimentological sequence, helps to provide some indication of the speed with which the various layers accumulated and the extent to which conditions at the time favoured molluscan life. Another adjunct to interpretation is the index of species diversity which is also plotted on Fig.2. This has been calculated using the Shannon-Wiener function, a mathematical formula which provides a quantitative measure taking account both of the number of taxa in a sample and the evenness of abundance of those taxa (Krebs 1972, p.506). This has been calculated at the suggestion of Dr.John Evans and these and other calculations involved in mollusc analysis have been considerably speeded up by the MOLCALC-PET programme which has been prepared at Bristol by David Maguire. Calculation of the Shannon-Wiener function is an aid to interpretation because, regard-less of the individual ecological preferences of the species involved, we can predict that a complex ecosystem with a range of niches (e.g. broadleaved woods with several storeys of vegetation) will have a high index of diversity compared to a simple ecosystem with few niches (e.g. arable land). Useful as this measure of diversity is, we must clearly exercise caution in applying it to sub-fossil

assemblages where, depending on the context, we face varying levels
of uncertainty as to whether all the species lived together as an
ecological community at one time and place.

The Ditch

A full description of the ditch sediments at the point sampled
is contained in Dr. Keeley's (1981) report on soil studies. The
following is an abbreviated outline of the main layers. Descriptive
and quantitative terms (e.g. moderately stony) follow Hodgson (1976)
and the tripartite classification of ditch sediments (primary,
secondary and tertiary) is that outlined by Evans (1972, pp.321-328)
and Limbrey (1975, pp.290-300).

Depth

0-20 cm. Modern plough rendzina top soil - Context 1.

20-78 cm Dark yellowish brown (10 YR 4/4) silty, clay loam,
moderately stony with both chalk and flints. A lack
of sorting suggests this is a colluvial ploughwash
deposit; the tertiary fill - Contexts 538, 1065.

78-89 cm Lens of small and medium rounded chalk pieces, probably
derived from levelling of the bank - Context 1421.

89-100 cm Dark brown (10 YR 3/3) friable clay loam with few stones;
a stabilization horizon sorted to a limited extent by
earthworm activity - Context 1444.

100-110cm Stone accumulation layer at base of stabilization horizon,
poorly represented in the field but demonstrated by the
sedimentological graph (Fig.2).

110-176 cm.   Brown (10 YR 5/3) clay loam moderately stony with both

flints and chalk, poorly sorted;   the secondary fill;

Contains Beaker pottery - Context 487.

176-195 cm.   Medium sized chalk lumps in a matrix of calcium carbonate.

This layer and below represents the primary fill - Context

1420.

195-273 cm.   Medium and large chalk lumps with many voids. Within the

layer were three bands of coarse chalk rubble separated

by two bands of finer rubble.

273-278 cm.   Very dark greyish brown (10 YR 3/2) clay loam with common

chalk pieces. Possibly a turf which had collapsed into

the ditch - Context 2305.

278-300 cm.   Medium chalk lumps - Context 2306.

The primary fill contained very few molluscs (generally less

than 10 per sample) and these samples have been omitted from the

histograms (Fig.1). In any case the molluscs concerned were probably

weathered from the ditch sides and are of little value for inter-

pretation. Of more interest is the soil lens at 272-278 cm which

was interpreted in the field as a possible collapsed turf. Analysis

did not, however, support this interpretation since a large soil

sample weighing 3.5 kg contained only 58 molluscs, far fewer than

one might expect in topsoil. More probably the lens represents sub-

soil from the pre-henge soil profile which has fallen, or been

washed, into the ditch. Pomatias elegans is the most abundant species,

it is often found in conditions of clearance and broken ground such as

probably accompanied construction of the henge, alternatively its

importance here may be explained by its tendency to become concentrated

in subsoil horizons. The other species present include Carychium
tridentatum, Acanthinula aculeata, Vitrina pellucida, the Zonitidae
and Clausilia bidentata which generally prefer shady conditions. With
these, however, are Vallonia excentrica and Helicella itala which
like open conditions. Interpretation is made difficult, both by
the small number of individuals and by a degree of uncertainty as
to whether they were all derived from the same horizon in the pre-
henge soil. All we can do is to record the presence of shade-loving
and open country elements and see how this compares to assemblages
from overlying horizons.

The secondary fill between 110 and 176 cm produced much larger
numbers of molluscs and a higher index of diversity (mean = 3.6)
than the other layers. Clearly the sediments accumulated relatively
slowly and conditions were highly favourable for molluscan life.
Throughout this period the assemblage is characterised by an abundance
of Carychium tridentatum accompanied by large numbers of Discus
rotundatus, Aegopinella pura, Vitrea contracta and Vallonia costata.
There is also evidence for a small degree of ecological change
through the secondary fill. Helicella itala and some catholic
species are more abundant at the base, as are Punctum pygmaeum and
Nesovitrea hammonis which Evans (1982, p.331) reports as abundant
in the early stages of ditch colonization by plants. Subsequently,
towards the middle of the secondary fill, Pupilla muscorum, Vallonia
costata and Hellicella itala decrease and there is a corresponding
increase in the proportions of Carychium tridentatum, Discus rotundatus
and to a lesser extent Oxychilus cellarius and Aegopinella nitidula
which suggests some further increase in shade. The trend is a minor

one, however, and throughout the secondary fill the assemblage is predominently one of shade-loving species which account for a mean of 63% (using categories in Evans 1972, p.194). Associated with these are some 15% of species in the open country category. The only one of these which is consistently important is Vallonia costata which does occur at similar levels of abundance in open woodland. This is not the case, however, with Helicella itala which has been described as 'the most characteristically open country species' (Evans 1972, p.180) and occurs in small proportions in all samples.

We must now consider to what extent the predominently shade-loving assemblage in this layer reflects a more shady microenvironment in the ditch as opposed to general site conditions. If the assemblage had been the result purely of shade and lush vegetation in a ditch set within an otherwise open landscape, one can predict, on the basis of sites where it is possible to compare palaeosol and ditch assemblages, that there would be a much greater proportion of open country species (Thomas 1982). It might also be anticipated that the lower part of the secondary fill would produce a largely open assemblage and the proportion of shade-loving species would increase as vegetation colonized the ditch. Instead it is evident that a plant cover creating shady conditions was already present when the secondary fill began to accumulate. More problematical is the nature of the plant community. Tall ungrazed grassland has, for instance, been shown to support faunas similar in some respects to those from woodland (Cameron and Morgan-Huws, 1975). Such faunas tend to be rich in Carychium tridentatum, Vitrea contracta and Aegopinella pura which are all abundant in these samples. Tall

grassland faunas do not, however, contain <u>Discus rotundatus</u>,
<u>Aegopinella nitidula</u>, <u>Acanthinula aculeata</u>, <u>Oxychilus cellarius</u>
and the Clausiliidae which are present here. Further evidence that
the relatively rich assemblage is not purely the result of lush
grass in the sedimenting ditch comes from the sediments themselves.
Lush grass implies stable conditions but the 66 cm of poorly sorted
sediment clearly suggests conditions which were far from stable.
Taken in aggregate the evidence indicates that during the Beaker
period shady conditions were created at least partly by shrubs and
trees. Leaf litter accumulating in the ditch would account neatly
for the large numbers of <u>Carychium tridentatum</u>. Patches of bare
ground are implied by the sediments and those on the weathered
bank could have created a favourable niche for <u>Helicella itala</u>.

A further aspect of the secondary ditch fill assemblage which
deserved mention is the occurrence of a single example of <u>Oxyloma</u>
<u>pfeifferi</u> at 110-115 cm. This is anomalous because the species is
one of fens, marshes and wet places (Kerney and Cameron 1979, p.60).
Suitable habitats would almost certainly have existed in the Avon
valley 0.7 km to the south-east. A solitary individual might have
been brought here by a bird or mammal but it is much more likely that
it was imported by man along with reeds or some other raw material
from the valley.

At the very top of the secondary fill and into the stone
accumulation zone of the overlying stabilization horizon an abrupt
change occurs. There is a minor peak in mollusc numbers as one would
expect in a stabilization horizon but a gradual decrease in species
diversity. All the shade-loving species decline rapidly and never

achieve major representation again. In the early stages of this
decline there is a minor peak of Pomatias elegans, which is favoured
by clearance episodes and disturbed conditions. Following this is
a rapid increase in open country species: Pupilla muscorum, the
Vallonias, Helicella itala and Vertigo pygmaea. From these species
we can infer that conditions at the time of the stabilization
horizon were open, dry and most probably short grassland. The
reasonably large number of molluscs per kilogramme (up to 900)
is probably more an indication that the layer formed over a long
period rather than evidence that the environment was particularly
favourable for molluscs.

It was therefore probably some considerable time after the
removal of woody vegetation that a second aspect of clearance
occurred. This is represented by the sedimentological evidence for
levelling of the bank into the ditch to form the chalk lens at
78-89 cm. Then followed the deposition of 78 cm of colluvial soil
during which time there was a gradual decrease in the numbers of
molluscs and correspondingly in the index of diversity. The assemblage
is a restricted one dominated by Pupilla muscorum, Limacidae, the
Vallonias and Helicella itala. Some parallels can be seen with
assemblages in lynchet deposits (e.g. Evans 1972, p.319; Thomas
1977, p.262) and colluvial valley fills of arable origin (Bell 1981).
These generally have large numbers of Vallonias with Vallonia
excentrica predominating over Vallonia costata as in this case.
Where they differ from the present sediments is in having more
Trichia hispida and smaller numbers of Pupilla muscorum which seems
to shun intensive agriculture (Evans 1972, p.146). This could suggest

that brief grassland episodes interrupted the arable activity represented by the tertiary fill. If so the horizons in question must have been mixed during subsequent cultivation for there is no hint of stabilization horizons either from the sediments or the histogram of mollusc abundance.

At c. 30 cm the situation changes, Pupilla muscorum declines very suddenly and almost vanishes and there is a corresponding increase in Limacidae, Helicella itala and Candidula gigaxii. This change is probably the result of dryer and more intensive arable conditions during recent times. Candidula gigaxii is a species which was introduced in Medieval times (Kerney 1966) and quickly became a major colonizer of dry exposed habitats on the chalk. Small numbers of this species down to the stabilization horizon could mean that the whole of the tertiary fill is the result of cultivation which is known to have occurred on the site in Medieval and Post-Medieval times (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments 1979, p.13). More probably the few examples below 30 cm may be the product of a small degree of biogenic disturbance which has been shown to occur in similar deposits in dry valleys (Bell 1981, p.374).

The Features

Outside the henge a large pit was excavated and found to contain an early Neolithic artifact assemblage. One sample was examined from a soil layer within the fill(Context 2507) in an attempt to obtain evidence about the pre-henge environment. Interpretation of feature fills of this kind is hazardous, clearly most of the molluscs did not actually live in the features but were derived from

possibly multiple contexts round its periphery, these might easily have included earlier sub-soil features. The assemblage does, however, have a close general similarity to that from the secondary fill of the ditch. In terms of Evans' (1972, p.194) ecological groups 51% are woodland species, 23% of catholic ecological preferences and 25% open country. Thus the proportion of open country species and particularly of Helicella itala is slightly greater than all but the very basal sample of the secondary fill. We may infer from this that there is no evidence that the early Neolithic environment was dramatically different from that of the later Neolithic and Beaker period and that areas of shade are likely to have existed.

Within the henge two shallow subsoil features of irregular shape were tentatively interpreted in the field as former tree holes possibly relating to an earlier woodland episode. Analysis did not support this hypothesis. In the sample from context 1602/1242 the predominant species are the Vallonias, Helicella itala and Pupilla muscorum; together open country species comprise 47% of the assemblage with shade-loving types, particularly Discus rotundatus, forming 31%. The closest match with the ditch sequence is with the bottom of the stabilization horizon. The second subsoil hollow (Context 1798) produced a smaller number of species with a low index of diversity and a species composition corresponding to the tertiary fill of the ditch. The main species were Helicella itala, the Vallonias and the Limacidae. These features are not, therefore, the eroded relics of climax woodland, but more probably the result of minor scrub growth in post Neolithic times.

Conclusions

   The absence of a pre-henge soil is most unfortunate. The only
evidence we have for the pre-henge environment comes from two
isolated samples: one from the early Neolithic pit (Context 2507),
the other from the soil lens at 273-278 cm in the primary ditch fill.
Unsatisfactory as these two contexts are for mollusc analysis, they
do hint at the existence of some shade in the pre-henge environment.
More satisfactory evidence pointing in the same direction comes from
the base of the secondary fill, since most of the woodland species
were clearly on hand to colonize the site, and form the predominant
aspect of the assemblage at the lowest level of the secondary fill.
Some importance attaches therefore to the timescale for accumulation
of the primary fill. Judging by the Overton Down Experimental Earth-
work (Crabtree 1971) this is likely to have accumulated in a few
(possibly less than twenty) years. Indeed the suggestion of alternating
coarse and fine sediments resemble the annual bands observed in the
Overton ditch. If this timescale is accepted then it seems likely
that shady habitats were present close to the site at the time of
construction. We cannot, however, assume that the monument was con-
structed in woodland. A warning against making this assumption comes
from the Mount Pleasant Henge (Evans and Jones 1979) where we can
compare evidence from the old land surface and ditch. The old land
surface showed the monument had been constructed, following woodland
clearance, in a grassland environment. However, a stabilization
horizon at the base of the secondary fill had a shade-loving assemblage
which contained little clear indication of the foregoing grassland
episode. This indicates that, had the Coneybury Henge been constructed

in a clearing which then became overgrown, it is by no means certain
that the earlier episode would register at the base of the secondary
fill. What we can say is that if the henge was constructed in a
cleared area then that area is likely to have been of small size
and seems to have become overgrown within a generation. Shady
conditions certainly obtained at the time of the site's Beaker
utilization.

It remains to compare the Coneybury sequence with that from
other henges. Most were constructed after forest clearance in an
open grassland environment, often of fairly long standing. No
evidence has survived to show that this was the case at Coneybury
and the speed of colonization by shrubs and trees implies that
shade survived not far away in the pre-henge environment. Other
henges in the area of the Stonehenge Environs Project have produced
molluscan evidence that they were constructed in grassland, this
was the case at Durrington Walls (Evans 1971) and Woodhenge (Evans
and Jones 1979) and a similar environment has been infered from
the soil profile below the bank of Stonehenge itself (Evans 1978).
Similar pre-henge grassland environments have been demonstrated at
Avebury (Evans 1972), Mount Pleasant (Evans and Jones 1979) and
Priddy (Dimbleby 1967). Only at Condicote on the Cotswold lime-
stone do we have a ditch assemblage with a predominantly shade-
loving fauna in the primary fill which implies that the monument
may have been constructed in woodland (Bell 1980). Fewer post-
construction ditch sequences have been obtained. An entirely open
landscape was maintained at Woodhenge but Coneybury, Condicote and
Mount Pleasant were colonized by shrubs and woodland in the period

following construction. It remains to be established whether this

represents a reduced level of land utilization in late Neolithic/

Beaker times or is simply a reflection of a fairly complex mosaic

of vegetation types on the chalk and limestone during Neolithic

and Bronze Age times.

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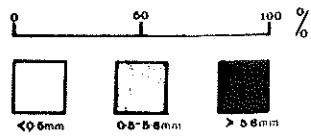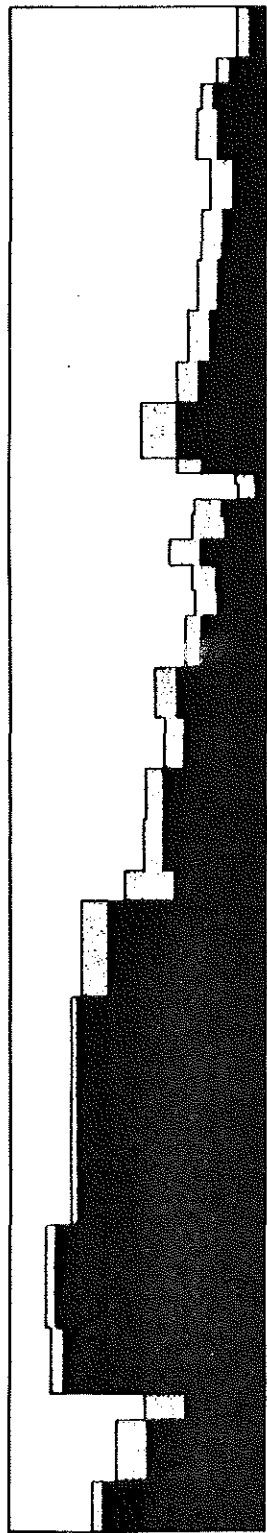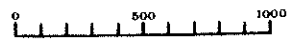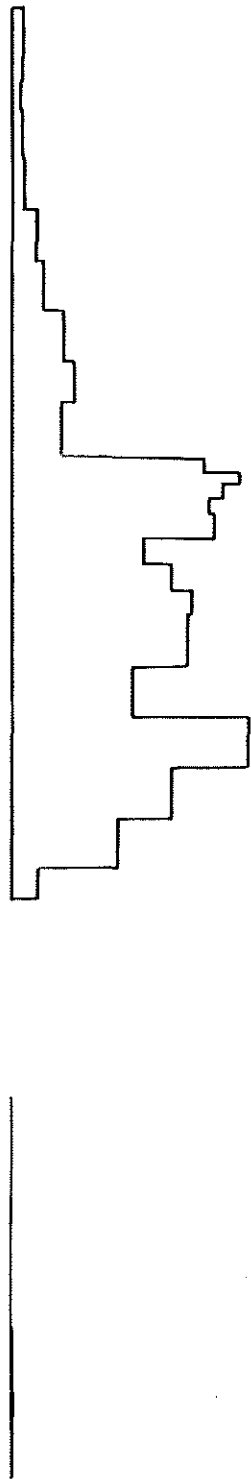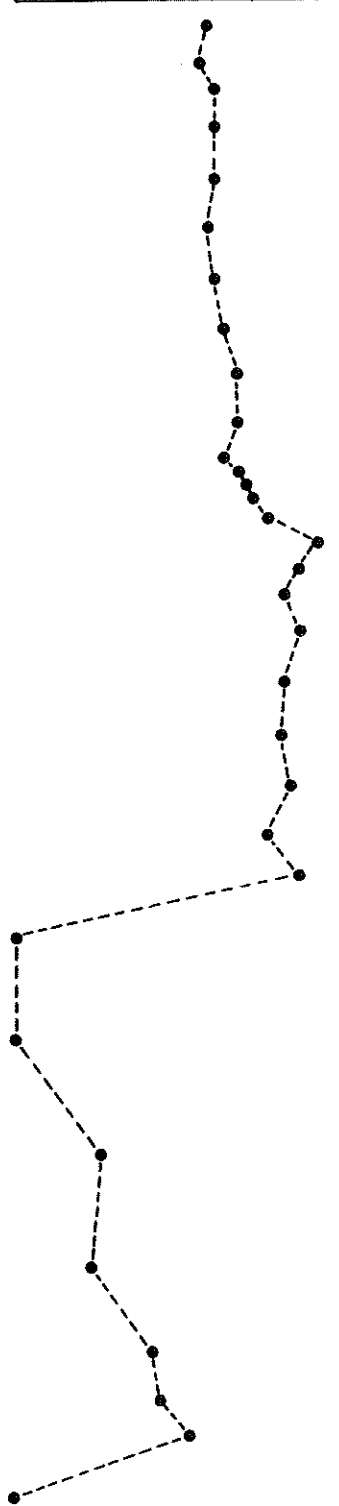| Species / Context	Ditch																																Other contexts		
(context no.)	1684	1091	1130	2071	1678	1831	1414	2078	1543	1448	740	656	808	534	1065	1147	1224	181	2311	2051	2558	2004	1601	1551	2145	2141	143	2141	1243	118	...	...	1913	1740	1443
(depth cm)	0-10	10-15	15-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	70-78	78-81	81-92	92-94	94-97	97-100	100-105	105-110	110-115	115-120	120-125	125-135	135-145	155-160	160-172	172-176	176-175	175-185	185-260	260-273	273-278	278-290	290-300	1684	778	420
Pomatias elegans (Müller)	1	3	1	4	3	5	8	5	10	15	10	1	23	22	56	67	106	42	78	31	135	25	+				+		+	31	+	8	3	11
Carychium tridentatum Riso						1		2	2	1		5	8	7	35	82	217	240	401	307	776	369	222	14			1			2	1	8		62
Oxyloma pfeifferi (Rossmässler)																1																		
Cochlicopa lubrica (Müller)									1					1	3			1	13	5	13	1										1		
Cochlicopa lubricella (Porro)									10	7	6	1	3	3	5	9	84	9	21	27	2													
Cochlicopa spp	1	2		1	2	2	5	10	14	16	19	24	30	14	36	24	35	36		37	81	68	34	14				1				3		8
Vertigo pygmaea (Draparnaud)						4	7	22	16	11	14	20	24	10	10	5	4	3	10	3	7	1	3	1				+			1		1
Vertigo spp.																									1									
Pupilla muscorum (Linnaeus)	2		2	2	23	64	83	133	140	104	127	174	218	112	194	52	15	9	24	10	18	26	27	5		1		1	+	1		15	3	7
Vallonia costata (Müller)	3	1	1	7	3	20	11	36	37	48	115	83	61	47	125	43	24	39	134	46	74	146	106	16			3	1				13	9	2
Vallonia excentrica Sterki	7	6	4	16	15	47	34	126	101	77	164	132	156	100	163	73	26	19	45	7	17	17	6	2			3						4	5
Vallonia spp																											+							
Acanthinula aculeata (Müller)						3		1	1	1	2	4	1	2	11	10	15	15	33	67	22		3				2							4
Ena montana (Draparnaud)											1																							
Ena obscura (Müller)								1	1			2		1	2	4	7	2	17	3	3													1
Punctum pygmaeum (Draparnaud)				1		2		2	2	3		2	4	5	2	2	11	10	29	21	11	13					2							
Discus rotundatus (Müller)					1	2	3	1	2	2	5	5	10	26	67	41	69	130	267	124	37	9			1	2	+				14			11
Vitrina pellucida (Müller)						1						1		7	6	6	6	7	4		1						1							
Vitrea crystallina (Müller)																2		9																
Vitrea contracta (Westerlund)						1				2	1	4	13	36	26	63	62	163	87	44	17						2				7	1	9
Nesovitrea hammonis (Ström)														9	4	1	23	6	40	32	19	9					1							3
Aegopinella pura Alder													4	11	34	21	111	87	195	105	71	13					1				3			4
Aegopinella nitidula (Draparnaud)		1					2	1			8	1	15	16	11	20	28	27	51	26	7						1							
Oxychilus cellarius (Müller)	1					1			1	3		5	3	18	6	37	23	44	15						1						6		7	
Oxychilus alliarius (Müller)														2	5	3			4															
LIMACIDAE	16	7	10	13	5	8	20	21	22	27	9	33	25	23	33	45	33	63	96	70	17	42	25	4			1	1			10	7	7	
Cecilioides acicula (Müller)	112	66	71	368	415	258	205	126	74	76	15	6	4	6	16	14	3	3	2	1					1						477	563	445	
Cochlodina laminata (Montagu)			1		1			1					1	1	1	1		1									1							
Macrogastra rolphii (Turton)									1							3																		
Clausilia bidentata (Ström)	1	1		4	1	1		7	5	1	5	4	6	3	19	17	22	7	17	10	40	8	3				2				2	1	3	
Balea perversa																			2															
Clausiliidae																											+							
Candidula gigaxii (Pfeiffer)	23	8	9	5			2	4	1	2		2	1		1																	1	2	
Helicella itala (Linnaeus)	23	20	12	30	17	25	29	18	40	57	67	56	54	47	104	36	17	11	29	14	48	22	9	15			3	1			25	26	26	
Trichia striolata (C. Pfeiffer)																		1																
Trichia hispida (Linnaeus)				2	1	2	11	16	6	10	6	23	11	9	27	57	64	107	18	29	55	28	7		5		3	4			5		12	
Helicigona lapicida (Linnaeus)							2					2	2	2	1	8		1	2	+		5			+									
Cepaea nemoralis (Linnaeus)													1																					
Cepaea hortensis (Müller)														1	+	2															1			
Cepaea spp	1		1		1			4	1	1	6	6	3	13	6	4	3	26	4	29	2	4	1				+				2	1	3	
Total	79	48	42	82	73	119	210	401	418	372	559	510	671	415	849	585	768	674	440	964	2115	1261	678	150	0	0	7	2	7	58	5	0	139	56	200

Coneybury Henge

Ditch

Particle size

Molluscs per kg.

Index of species diversity

%

<0.5mm   0.5-5.6mm   > 5.6mm

Coneybury   **Henge**   **Ditch**